

Proposed NHAL Boundary Expansion

The Department is proposing two expansions of the NHAL project boundary. The proposed expansion areas are depicted on Map 8: Proposed Boundary Expansion. The boundary expansion is proposed to benefit the overall forest ecology, environmental health, and recreation needs of the NHAL. Areas within the boundary would be considered for a range of protection options including purchase, cooperative agreements, and easements.

What would this mean for property owners within the expansion areas? Simply stated, if approved by the Natural Resources Board, the boundary expansion means the Department has authority to negotiate and purchase land or easements from willing sellers within the expanded boundary area. The Department can not purchase lands for the state forest outside of the approved boundary. A state forest boundary expansion does not in any way encumber, or place any easements, covenants or other controls on private land in the area. When property owners choose to sell they may sell to whomever they choose – whether it be the state, a private party or a family member. Also, property owners may will the property to any person or organization they choose.

The current NHAL acquisition goal is 226,200 acres, of which the Department has purchased almost 99 percent. The proposed boundary expansion areas total about 57,000 acres. The proposed acquisition goal would be 283,200 acres, which is a 25 percent increase over the previous acquisition goal.

The Northern Expansion Area: As previously discussed in the alternatives, the northern boundary expansion would expand the forest to the Wisconsin-Michigan state line. However, not all lands within this area would be targeted for acquisition. As is shown on Map 8: Proposed Boundary Expansion, about 35,000 acres of concentrated developments, lakes, and an existing State Natural Area are excluded from the forest expansion proposal. The northern boundary expansion includes 55,000 acres of land the WDNR may have an interest in purchasing in the future.

The northern expansion area probably represents the last place in Wisconsin to protect a reasonably large cluster of lakes within a mosaic of high quality northern forest. This area has one of the highest densities of lakes in the world. While most of the lakes in Vilas and Iron Counties are developed, this area includes some undeveloped or lightly developed lakes. For many residents and visitors to the region, this lake-forest setting is the definition of “what makes the north the north.” These lakes support an unusually diverse and high quality assemblage of aquatic natural communities. The area contains a high quality forest complex with several patches of old growth. Numerous rare species are known to occur here, particularly birds and plants. Several sites within this area were identified in the NHAL Biotic Inventory.

The boundary expansion would link the NHAL with large tracts of county, state, and national forests in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Acquisition of lands here would allow for a variety of recreational trails and facilities. It would also allow for broader ecosystem level forest management of the hemlock-hardwood forest communities that grow on the area’s loamy soils. These communities are uncommon on the NHAL, which is mostly covered in sandy soils and aspen or pine forest communities.

The Wisconsin River Area: This proposed 2,100 acre boundary expansion runs along the Wisconsin River in two places from the southern edge of the state forest to the head of the Rhinelander Flowage. It was not identified previously in the alternatives, but is in response to a number of comments received on the alternatives. The purpose of this expansion is to provide long-term conservation of the immediate Wisconsin River shoreline in this area, which contains important wildlife and endangered species habitat.

Previous public comments on the boundary expansion: Many comments on the NHAL boundary expansion were heard in March of 2002. The strongest public voice was in favor of the [northern] boundary expansion for a variety of reasons, including linking public lands, linking and protecting ecosystems, and providing recreational linkages and future public access to forests and lakes. Some people were opposed to expansion, mostly out of concern over cost to taxpayers. To address this concern, we revised the boundary expansion map to exclude areas the WDNR would not be interested in purchasing. These areas are mainly developed parcels with houses and businesses. Cost to taxpayers is also addressed through state payments in lieu of taxes.

Payments in Lieu of Taxes and “Moratorium Areas”: The State will continue to make Aids-In-Lieu of tax payments to towns for state-owned land within the township boundaries. The WDNR would make additional payments to local governments for new land purchased within the existing boundary or proposed expanded boundary. WDNR payments are meant to replace the property taxes that would have been levied had the property remained on the tax roll. In addition, public ownership reduces the demand on local governments for services such as utilities, schools, and fire protection.

Fourteen townships exist within the current forest boundary. Seven of these townships have had their “downtown area” removed from the forest boundary. Land acquisition has been under a “moratorium” in these areas. Any Department managed state lands in these areas are classified as scattered lands. Under the Preferred Alternative, the “moratorium” areas would continue.